

# Texts That

*To create lifelong readers, we need to give students reading materials that leave them wanting to know more.*

**Gay Ivey**

**H**unkered down at Barnes and Noble one morning with my favorite Starbucks comfort drink, I savored a weekly ritual—an extended do-not-disturb period with the Sunday *New York Times*. As usual, I flipped to the op-ed pages to find columnist Maureen Dowd's latest contribution.

From the moment I read her opening line—"Women are getting unhappier, I told my friend Carl"—I knew this was going to be a good one. Dowd lamented that

When women stepped into male-dominated realms, they put more demands—and stress—on themselves. If they once judged themselves on looks, kids, hubbies, gardens, and dinner parties, now they judge themselves on looks, kids, hubbies, gardens, dinner parties—and grad school, work, office deadlines, and meshing a two-career marriage. (2009, p. WK9)

I could relate, and I immediately thought of several female friends and colleagues who are even more compelling examples of this phenomenon. I sent several of them an electronic link to the column, knowing that a lively e-mail conversation would ensue over the next day or so. I also read some of the hundreds of reactions from other readers of the column that were posted on the *New York Times* Web site ([www.NYTimes.com](http://www.NYTimes.com)), some ardently agreeing with Dowd and others expressing their outrage.

Less than a month later, the release of *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything* by Maria Shriver (Simon and Schuster, 2009) generated a flurry of media attention centering on the plight of working women. I was drawn to morning news show interviews, blogs, and more editorials that extended my thinking about Dowd's ideas and prompted me to consider related issues, such as equal pay for equal work, the changing expectations placed on men, and the



social and political implications of women serving in powerful governmental and executive roles. I will likely keep pondering these issues as I seek out or stumble across texts, both print and digital, that give me new ways to think and talk about them.

Of course, not everything I read for information has such an expansive societal reach. I've been known to conduct extensive research on different brands of shoes that are stylish and yet comfortable enough to help me stay on my feet throughout a six-hour professional development workshop.

# Matter



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Or even more personal and not so frivolous, I read and compared whatever I could find on endometrial cancer when my mother was diagnosed with it some years ago.

But as I reflect on the range of informational reading that informs the personal, professional, and civic dimensions of my life, I can't help thinking how much it differs from the way most elementary and secondary school classrooms practice reading and writing to learn. As a university professor, I also think about the contrast between the literacy experiences students have in kindergarten through grade 12 and those

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they encounter in college, where they are often expected to access, evaluate, and critically analyze both print and nonprint texts and to create innovative texts that incorporate evolving understandings (Yancey, 2009). Even students who enter the workplace right after high school need advanced literacy skills, including reading critically across various sources of information, using technology to communicate, addressing a variety of audiences, and reading and writing collaboratively (Beaufort, 2009).

In all of these situations, text matters—and it matters a lot. In this strategies-crazed era in literacy policy and practice, we may be missing a more fundamental challenge—identifying and making available the texts that inspire students to want to learn new information.

The matter of *what* students read is a make-or-break dimension of literacy-based learning. A few years ago, Richard Allington (2002) offered a forthright and compelling argument that “You can’t learn much from books you can’t read” (p. 16). I second that notion, but I would further argue that (a) you can’t learn much from books that don’t matter to you, and (b) you can’t learn much from just one book.

### **From the Texts We Have . . .**

For generations, students have struggled with, resisted, or faked textbook reading. If you asked most adults how they know some bit of common knowledge central to textbooks—for instance, the names and functions of the three branches of the U.S. government—I doubt that the most popular response would be, “Back in school, my government teacher assigned that chapter in the textbook, and I read it, and from that point on I knew.” Most people acquire this kind of

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reading that we do only to avoid the consequences of not reading, such as getting a bad grade.

Yet most schools have not relented in the purchase and use of traditional textbooks. And the practice of teaching students strategies for content-area reading, popular in professional development texts and inservice workshops, may have exacerbated the problem.

The thinking behind many content-area reading strategies is that if we provide teacher scaffolding, we can get

students through difficult, unappealing texts. There are some fundamental problems with this thinking. First, it assumes that the right question, graphic organizer, or writing prompt will help a student become motivated and able to read an otherwise unreadable text. Second, it ignores differences among readers by assuming that every student in a class needs the same scaffolding strategy to access a particular text.

There is no doubt that guiding students through reading keeps them more on task, but I have heard few scenarios in which scaffolded reading experiences motivate students to continue learning about that topic on their own. Perhaps more important, student compliance can actually veil problems that might exist in our instruction and our curriculum materials.

knowledge over time through multiple encounters and uses of it in a variety of modes and contexts, not from reading about it in one sitting.

Of course, we *can* learn factual information from reading about it. But that’s likely to occur only when we have real reasons to read and authentic questions to answer (Guthrie, 1996). Learning is not likely to occur as a result of assigned

### **. . . To Texts That Matter**

Conventional textbooks across the content areas often mask what is most interesting and relevant about the topics we are required to teach. The right texts, though, can help students care about content.

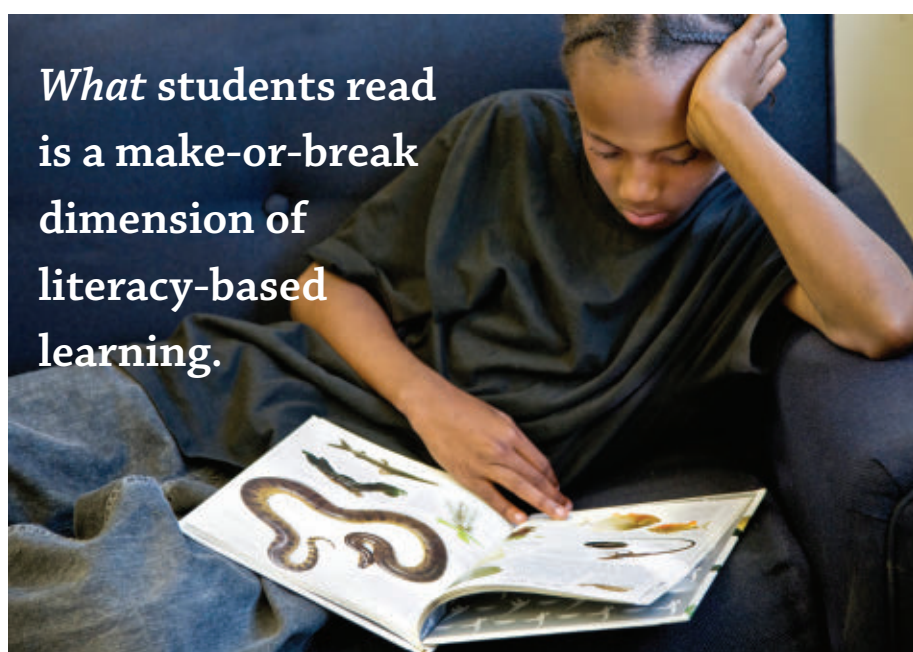
Some texts may hook students by presenting content that is unusual or

even bizarre. For instance, *Guinea Pig Scientists: Bold Self-Experimenters in Science and Medicine* (Henry Holt and Company, 2005) includes a memorable chronicle of what one scientist ate, excreted, and then studied to discover how the process of digestion works. *Secrets of a Civil War Submarine: Solving the Mysteries of the H. L. Hunley* (Carolrhoda Books, 2005) lures readers into a lesson about forensics, among other things, as they read about human remains that were found in a vessel more than a century after it sank.

Other texts relate content to students' own lives. For instance, *Sisters and Brothers: Sibling Relationships in the Animal World* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008) begins with "Playing together, working together, arguing, fighting—sometimes animal brothers and sisters act a lot like human siblings" (Jenkins & Page, 2008, p. 1). If you continue reading, you will learn that some animal family relationships seem almost human (such as older female elephants "babysitting" young siblings) whereas other interactions are different (such as the fact that, in both wild turkey families and cheetah families, sisters go off to start their own families whereas brothers band together for life).

Next, consider the opening lines of *Henry's Freedom Box* by Ellen Levine (Scholastic, 2007): "Henry Brown wasn't sure how old he was. Henry was a slave. And slaves weren't allowed to know their birthdays" (p. 1). The initial hook is provocative because most young readers would find this scenario outlandish and vastly different from their own life. If students continue reading this picture book, they learn the true story of a man who escaped slavery by shipping himself in a wooden crate. Good texts can bridge the gap between what students already know and the academic content they encounter in the classroom.

Contrast these texts with the more typical texts found in classrooms, such



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as a textbook chapter that gives a general historical summary of how the cotton gin and the steamboat changed early America. There is likely something fascinating about that point in U.S. history, but the texts students usually read on this topic do a good job of hiding it.

Even in the absence of published texts that students can relate to, teachers can enable students to use literacy to make connections. Hansen (2009) described a U.S. history teacher's thoughtful decision to use writing combined with students' personal stories to help them understand Franklin Delano Roosevelt's declaration that December 7, 1941, would be "a day that will live in infamy." The teacher asked students to write about a day from their own lives that left an "indelible imprint" on them (p. 601). The students' personal essays became part of the classroom currency and helped them gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of people in the United States at the beginning of World War II.

The texts that matter to students—the texts that they read willingly and

enthusiastically—can rarely be characterized as "just the facts." Sometimes, these texts get at big ideas, and sometimes they highlight the intriguing contexts in which curriculum standards are embedded. In any case, instead of focusing on how to get students to *remember* what they read, our best bet is to provide texts that are more *memorable*.

### From Reading One Text . . .

A single-text curriculum bolstered by content-area literacy strategies not only distracts us from the need to engage students in their reading, but also may prevent students from engaging with big concepts. Reading about a subject or concept briefly and then moving on suggests there is not much to know about that topic and that thinking about it critically is unimportant. Even more troublesome, most conventional subject-area reading addresses generally agreed-upon information, leaving little for students to figure out for themselves or to contemplate with others.

Our testing practices perpetuate the problem. Instruction in informational reading is often influenced by what state

accountability tests measure—for instance, whether students can find the main idea in a particular text, or even more specific and inconsequential, whether they can make an inference using just a couple of lines of text. For the long term, what we really want students to be able to do is read across texts critically and analytically. We have become overly concerned with whether students can comprehend a particular text and not concerned enough about whether students can use multiple texts to grapple with big ideas.

Even the wording of standards and their supporting materials perpetuate a narrow perspective on reading and writing to learn. For instance, in the curriculum framework for U.S. history linked to the Virginia Standards of Learning (Virginia Department of Education, 2008), most of the essential questions to guide instruction are designed to elicit a common and finite response: “What were the reasons for the United States becoming involved in World War I?” (p. 15); “How did the African American struggle for equality become a mass movement?” (p. 28). Once students have learned the answers to these questions, they have little reason to continue reading unless we provide them with texts that make them want to know more.

### **. . . To Reading Endlessly**

What leaves us wanting to read more are unanswered questions, issues that have a degree of ambiguity, and ideas that evoke multiple interpretations or possibilities. Reading solely to remember information in order to meet curriculum standards does not require problem solving, new understandings, or new ways of thinking. Reading and thinking end at the conclusion of the text.

Alternatively, students who read across texts and genres will read more and read more deeply. Maria Nichols (2009) describes a process to help elementary students build understand-

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ings through *text sets*—collections of sources of information in different genres that explore a shared topic or issue. In text sets preconstructed by the teacher or created by students themselves, the students engage in ongoing reading, writing, and conversation on curriculum topics—and they also gain insights into the value of multiple sources of information and the purposes and uses of various genres.

Nichols describes one unit in which students read a collection of texts about George Washington as part of their study of American heroes. The text set included a simple biography (*George Washington*, Capstone Press, 1999); a more in-depth comic-book-style biography (*George Washington: First President*, Scholastic, 2004); the Mount Vernon Web site ([www.mountvernon.org](http://www.mountvernon.org)), which offered students a look at Washington’s impressive home but also the revelation of slave quarters; a book examining Washington’s service in the Revolutionary War that contained many primary sources (*When Washington Crossed the Delaware: A Wintertime Story for Young Patriots*, Simon and Schuster, 2004); and the fictionalized story *George Washington’s Teeth* (Square Fish, 2007). Each of these texts added to the students’ understanding of the question, What is a hero?

Likewise, older students can grapple with tough issues by reading critically to consider all angles of a topic. For instance, students may read *A Child Called It* (Health Communications, 1995); *Three Little Words* (Atheneum, 2008); and *Lesson from a Dead Girl*

(Candlewick, 2007) to obtain three glimpses into physical child abuse. Through their varying perspectives, these books can help students understand the complex causes, responses, culpability, and implications associated with abuse.

To ensure that students will adopt the habit of reading to figure out the present and future, rather than just to revisit the past, we must give them opportunities to read timely texts. Digital texts of all sorts are useful because they often deliver the most recent information and contain unanswered questions.

For instance, students studying the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights might review recent online news articles about citizens’ rights being decided in a court of law. A quick Google search yields a host of texts describing teens involved in First Amendment cases, such as the right to carry a purse with a Confederate flag patch attached to it in school (Hudson, 2009) and the right to post signs with religious messages on a high school football field (Brown, 2009).

But keeping up with the onslaught of information currently available is not the only reason to embrace new kinds of media in K–12 classrooms. Moje (2008) argues that because experts within the disciplines (for example, historians and scientists) already use sophisticated new literacy practices to develop understanding within their fields, schools need to mirror those efforts across the content areas. Reproducing old ideas from old texts can no longer be the focus of literacy-based learning.

### **Beginning the Shift**

We hear a lot of lip service paid to equipping students with “21st century literacy skills.” But when it comes to subject-area reading materials, we are stuck in a rut. In our efforts to improve literacy-based learning, our first order of business ought to be a serious examination of the reading materials from which we expect students to learn.



If our goal is to get students to read voluntarily and not just by coercion, then we must change how we select and prioritize materials. If we expect students to read beyond the curriculum, beyond the school day, and beyond 12th grade, then we need to show them the texts and purposes that make reading worthwhile and that they can actually find outside school. If we want students to learn how literacy can help them live well, think better, and participate more effectively in society, then we must give them access to texts that open their eyes to new possibilities. **EL**

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